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Chapter 6.

THE RULE APPLIED WITH ILLUSTRATIONS.

Robert Young, the author of that most valuable research tool, *An Analytical Concordance of the Old and View Testament*, also produced a *Literal Translation of the Bible*. In his Introduction he sets forth very carefully with support from various authorities certain views regarding the use of tenses in Hebrew. He then applies these rules rigidly. The resulting narrative, while perhaps more precisely correct from the view of Hebrew syntax and grammar (assuming his "rules" are valid), is difficult indeed to read cursively with profit. The English is stilted and does not "flow". The sentences are staccato and just occasionally hardly seem to make sense at all. The lesson one learns from this is that translation demands a certain amount of freedom. In order to make literature

live, a translator is justified in taking some liberties not on linguistic
grounds but for dramatic reasons, though the dangers of doing this
are very considerable.

Now, my reason for using this example is simply to emphasize
the need for caution in insisting on obedience upon all occasions to
some rule that has, after all, only been established by reference to

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general usage. In language, this is the only way that rules *can* be
established. But when a translation is made for reading (as well as
for study), then some departure from the rules sometimes has to be
allowed. Thus I would not argue that הָיָה must always and on all
occasions be rendered "become" or "became" or even "come to be"
(ie. , "happen") whenever it is found in the present or past tense.
The fact is that there are sentences even in English where the word
"be" really *means* "become" and yet we commonly accept the word
"be". For example, "I refuse to be a party to it" really means "I
refuse to *become* a party to it". So one should not *always* translate
according to the letter of the law.

In the opening words of his Preface, Driver, after noting that
Hebrew is particularly careful in distinguishing between the sense of
"being" and "becoming" and after pointing out how little attention we

are apt to pay to this difference, remarks:

> "So cumbrous is the mechanism which has to be set in
> motion in order to express the difference, so palpable is the
> strain to which our language is subjected in the process, that
> we feel irresistibly tempted to discard and forget it."

And again:

> "On the agreement of a verb with its subject in number, a
> point to which in certain cases the ancient Hebrews attached
> no importance whatever, we ourselves are sensitive and
> precise: on the other hand, the difference between *being* and
> *becoming*, *seyn* and *werden*, εἶναι and
> γίγνομαι has never
> been fully appropriated or naturalized in English...."

> The only time one ought to be particularly careful is when there
> is a possibility of a real misunderstanding as to the sense, when there
> is an ambiguity that it is important to avoid. It *is* an important issue
> with respect to Gen. 1.2 whether one renders the Hebrew as "But the
> earth became...." or merely "But the earth was...." In such a
> case, to my mind, the true sense must be clearly established by
> reference to the rules of the language and rendered into English in
> such a way as to make that sense unambiguous.
>
> In a few cases it will not matter at all: mothers it may be critical.

In a large number of cases which fall between these extremes, there

may be considerable gain in rendering it correctly and unambiguously. Let me give a few illustrations, in none of which is הָיָה followed

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by לְ, yet all of which are by one translator or another rendered "became" or "had become", etc.

In Gen. 3.1, the Hebrew should be rendered, "Now the serpent had become more subtle than any beast of the field".* I believe this indicates that some circumstance had *changed* its character rather than that God had created it so from the beginning.

In Gen. 3.20, it would be more proper to render the passage as Driver does, "Eve became the mother of all living". It is virtually certain that at that time Eve was not yet a mother. The development which subsequently establishes her as the mother of the human race is here recorded in retrospect and it seems likely that Adam's *first* name for Eve was simply *Ishah*, or Woman. This kind of retrospect observation surely applies to Gen. 2.23 also, for *Adam* could not possibly have said that a man should leave his mother and father and cleave to his wife, since such a thought would at that time be quite foreign to his experience. I do not mean by this that the saying is not divinely inspired. Adam may very well have renamed his wife Eve *after* she began to beget sons and daughters and they in turn

begat children.

In Gen. 21.20, there is a nice instance of precision in the use of the verb הָיָה. Speaking of Ishmael, the original tells us "And it came to pass (וַיְהִי) that God (was) with the lad (אֶת־הַנַּעַר) and he grew and dwelt in the wilderness and *became* a drawer of the bow".

The Vulgate has *factusque est*, ie., "and he became...." And the Septuagint has εγενετο. The passage is quite similar to that of Gen. 4.2 (except for the inverted word order found there) which according to Driver (perhaps guided in part by the LXX)is rendered "And Abel *became* a shepherd of the flock, while Cain had become a tiller of the ground".

A particularly delightful passage is to be found in Gen. 29.17 which I would render more exactly from the Hebrew (and yet quite literally too!), "Now Rachael had become sparkling eyed and beautiful, but Leah always was weepy eyed". I realize that this sounds far-fetched at first sight, yet the fact is that the actual use of the verb הָיָה (and the word order) in the first instance justifies the use of "had become" in the pluperfect: and its absence in the second case implies a static situation-which I have expressed somewhat paraphrasically but not unreasonably by the words "always was". And whereas the original

* *Pusey so renders this passage.*

does suggest "sparks" when speaking of Rachael's eyes, it also suggests "wateriness" when referring to Leah! The Authorized Version is perhaps gentler with Leah than the Hebrew original. It is quite true that the change in word order could merely be to contrast with what precedes. But this contrast is not really specific in the text, and I think it is quite reasonable to say that Rachael as she grew to womanhood had become a strikingly beautiful woman, whereas Leah may have been watery-eyed from childhood.

An excellent illustration of how some translators heeded and other did not heed the sense of "becoming" in the verb הָיָה is in connection with Joseph's dream and the fate that intervened before it was fulfilled. In Gen. 37.20, I would render the Hebrew "Let us see what will *become* of his dreams". Both Driver and the Revised Standard Version have adopted this rendering. But the Septuagint have understood the meaning of Gen. 37.20 rather differently for they rendered it τί ἔσται τὰ ἐνύπτα αὐτοῦ, ie. , "What his dreams *will be*... The Septuagint translators evidently took the text to mean that the brothers wanted to cast Joseph into the pit and leave him there - to dream dreams of a somewhat less promising kind! This

could be the meaning since the tense is *future* and therefore הָיָה would be required in the appropriate form since the circumstances are viewed as being changed - or at least the nature of his dreams!

Yet I think the real significance of their remarks is that they wished to thwart the "promise" of the dream he had already told them about.

In Gen. 2.18 ff., we have another striking case where precision in translation is revealing. First, it is stated that it was not a good thing that Adam should be alone. He needed company of some kind. So, as I interpret the occasion, the Lord brought to the man various animals whose nature and habits (and size, presumably) might suggest to Adam that in these he would find the answer to his loneliness. It would not be so exceptional if he had done so, for many both young and old people today find greater pleasure in the company of some pet animal than they do in the society of their fellow man.

Adam's response to each creature, thus presented for his consideration as a companion, was at once reflected in the "name" he gave to it. In this process of naming, I do not think there was anything arbitrary at all. He was not merely providing a dictionary label for each creature so that it could be referred to thereafter without ambiguity. He was *identifying its nature*. The text says: "What-

soever he called (each animal) that (*was*) the name thereof". Now
in the original the verb הָיָה is absent. Had it been included, the

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sense of the text would then have been "that became its name" - and
superficially this is exactly what we might have expected the text to
say. The usual interpretation of the passage is that he gave each
animal a label and that the label "stuck": ie. , *that* became its name
thereafter. But from the way the Hebrew has actually stated the
matter, I think the meaning is much more profound. This was a
case of precise "identification". Adam identified each creature as
to its nature - and that really was in fact its nature: in short, he
was absolutely right in his assessment. *This*, in fact, is why not
one of them appeared to him to be a sufficient companion. In his
unfallen state, his judgment did not deceive him. What he said of
each animal was true: he marked each one for what it was, a creature
far below himself whose nature was quite unlike his own. His own
name was *Ish*, a word in some way describing his very nature. The
woman he correctly identified as *Ishah* for he recognized her as his
own counterpart: but not so, any of the other creatures. Thus what
appears as a naive fairy tale turns out to be a record of a profound

exercise inhuman judgment, an exercise which may indeed have ex-
hausted him and prepared him for the very deep sleep which followed.

By thus observing the rule with greater care, one may discern in this simple record an event of far greater significance than a mere invitation to engage in a game of attaching labels to animals. The story as so understood tells us some very important things about Adam's mental capacity at that time as well as about his relationship to the animals that shared his paradise. As we are told in the New Testament (I Tim. 2.14), Adam was not deceived in anything he under-took - even in eating the forbidden fruit. Thereafter his judgment undoubtedly began to suffer the noetic effects of sin and it seems unlikely that after the Fall he could any longer have identified with such perfect precision the kind of creature that each was by nature nor recognize his own true nature except by revelation. Our own judgment easily misleads us now into imagining that man is not funda-mentally different from certain forms of animal life which, assuming that they existed, would almost certainly have been among those brought for his assessment.

One of the better known passages often appealed to by those who share the view presented here is Jer. 4.23-2 6 which reads, "I beheld the earth and lo, it (*was*) without form and void; and the heavens, they

had no light.... and, lo, there (*was*) no man.... and the fruitful place
was a wilderness.... etc." The passage is an important one in the
present context for several reasons, both for what it does say and what
it does *not* say.

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The overall picture reveals some striking similarities with the
situation in Gen. 1.2, the ruin and devastation, the darkness, and the
absence of man. That Jeremiah is referring not to the first stages
of God's creative activity but to a historical situation which faced
him at the time of his vision is clear. But this does not lessen the
force of his words nor the significance of the fact that his terms are
precisely those employed in Gen. 1.2. Skinner freely admits that
we must see here a picure of a scene "from which life and order
have fled.... a darkened and devastated earth". Yet, like many
others, he maintains that the very same terms when used in Gen. 1.2
must mean something quite different! There *is* a difference, an
interesting one, between Gen. 1.2 and Jer.4.23, and that is in the
omission of the verb הָיָה in Jeremiah. Evidently Jeremiah's vision
is not a vision of the *occurrence* of the event in which he sees first
a beautiful, inhabited, and fruitful land suddenly becoming a devast-
ation. What his vision encompasses is the after effect, the *fait*

accomplis; in short, simply a scene of total destruction. Hence
the verb הָיָה is unnecessary.

But since the term תֹּהוּ and בֹּהוּ (*tohu wa bohu*) which describe
the earth in Gen. 1.2 are here applied to a scene of devastation, it is
difficult to avoid the conclusion that this is the correct meaning of
those two terms when juxtaposed in this alliterative way. Possibly,
when used independently, the meanings may be slightly less dramatic,
having merely the sense of "vanity" (at least in the case of *Tohu*): but
when employed together, the meaning of each seems to be strongly
reinforced in the destructive sense, not merely negatively "in vain"
but positively destroyed.

For a better assessment of the meaning of *Tohu*, the reader will
find a full list of references in Appendix XVI. While *Tohu* will not
always be found to signify "destruction" but rather that which is not
approved or is to no good purpose, it does not appear to equate very
well with the classical Greek concept of Chaos which has the sense of
something not so much mal-formed, as un-formed. Thus, while
Jer.4.23 is not (by reason of its omission of the verb הָיָה) an exact
parallel to Gen. 1.2, the terms it uses are certainly stamped with a
meaning that conveys the sense of devastation and ruin in JUDGMENT
rather than mere incompleteness.

This naturally leads to another critical passage in the Old Test-
ament in which the word *Tohu* occurs twice, namely, in Isa.45.18

and 19. Verse 18 is often quoted by those who support the view I hold because it seems so clearly to determine the correct sense of the same word in Gen. 1.2. Now Isa.45.17-18 reads as follows:

> "But Israel shall be saved in the Lord with an everlasting salvation: ye shall not be ashamed nor confounded world without end. For thus saith the Lord that created the heavens; God Himself that formed the earth and made it; He hath established it, He created it not in vain (*Tohu*), He formed it to be inhabited: I am the Lord; and there is none else."

It is customary to point out that in this passage it is expressly stated that the Lord did *not* create the earth a *Tohu*. It is therefore argued, reasonably enough, that Gen. 1.2 cannot be a direct continuation of Gen.1.1, since this would imply that God *did* create the earth a *Tohu*. I believe the argument is a strong one and ought to be given due weight. But it is not compulsive, much as one might wish it were, because the word *Tohu* may legitimately be rendered "in vain" by treating it as an adverbial accusative. The propriety of adopting the Authorized Version rendering must be admitted in the light of verse 19 which reads "I have not spoken in secret, in a dark place of

the earth: I said not unto the seed of Jacob, Seek ye Me in vain (*Tohu*)".

Certainly in verse 19 the translation is much more reasonable than it would have been had Tohu been rendered "a ruin", for then the sentence would have read, "Seek ye Me, a ruin" - which is non-sense.* If one must render *Tohu* "in vain" in *this* passage, it cannot be altogether unreasonable to so render it in verse 18 where such a rendering does, after all, make very good sense.

There are, however, two points worthy of note here. First, that the sentence structure in verse 19 *forces* one to render the noun adverbially and thus to read it as "in vain". To do anything else makes nonsense of the sentence. By contrast, this is not true in verse 18. *Either* rendering is equally sensible. Thus some other consideration must settle the issue or at least tip the scales in favour of one rendering as against the other. And here I think there IS something to be said in favour of rendering the noun *as a noun*. The burden of the passage is that Israel has suffered a serious setback as a nation. Yet, says the prophet, all is not lost. Israel shall yet be saved, and next time it will be for ever. For the Lord once created a world which He beautifully appointed as a habitation for

** However, the RSV has "a chaos" in both verses, verse*

19 reading, "seek me in chaos", which is allowable enough,
but an odd sentence.

man, which He established with that end in view. And it is true,
Isaiah seems to be saying, that the earth fell into ruin and was
utterly devastated in judgment, but that is not the *way in which* it was
created: nor was it the *end for which* God had formed it. He intended
it as a habitation for man; and God intended Israel as a people for
Himself. Both goals will yet be achieved, even as the first goal
has already been.

Seen in this light, the passage might well justify the two different
renderings of *Tohu*, the first as "a ruin", the second as "in vain",
each sentence being structured differently to convey the difference
in meaning. There is nothing forced or strange about this kind of
literary device. Yet - for all this - there is no absolute certainty, and
each reader must decide the issue for himself, pending further light.

As we have said previously, a good case is not made stronger by
an appeal to a passage, the sense of which is not unequivocably clear,
and to my mind, Isa.45.18 is a strong witness only to those who
already accept the alternative rendering of Gen. 1.2. Some have
argued that the command to Adam to "re-plenish" the earth tells in

our favour also, but unfortunately the Hebrew word מָלֵא (translated
both here and in Gen. 9. l as "re-fill") does not necessarily bear this
meaning: it is the normal verb for the simple idea of "filling", though
it was also used on occasion to mean "refill".

Many passages in the Bible have been interpreted as having ref-
erence to the circumstances surrounding the devastation of Gen. 1.2,
but the case for an alternative rendering cannot be rested upon them.
Granted that there was such an event, then such passages may well
shed light on the matter, but the basic point at issue must be settled
on other grounds first.

In conclusion, then, it is my conviction that the issue is still an
open one, that all the objections raised against it thus far are not
really valid, that the rules of Hebrew syntax and grammar not only
allow this alternative rendering but positively favour it. The sense
of "becoming" is not foreign to the verb הָיָה, nor is it merely a less
common meaning that is to be allowed under certain rather limited
circumstances: it is *the* basic meaning of the verb, the simple
copulative sense being exceedingly rare, and the existential sense
(though not rare) a special sense which really arises from the more
basic meaning of *living*. Added to this is the word order inversion
which can only be accounted for in one of two ways, while one of these

(a change of subject) certainly cannot be argued very forcibly in view
of the fact that the last word of verse 1 is the first word of verse 2.

There is no requirement for the following *lamedh* where the "con-

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version" of one thing to another is a real conversion and not merely
an analogous one; and therefore there is no need for it here. And
the descriptive terms in the sentence are none of them such as one
would expect to find applied to something that has just come from the
creative Hand of God. Nor is it easy, in the light of its use else-
where in Scripture, to equate *Tohu* with the un-formed Chaos of
Greek mythology.

By and large, therefore, I suggest that the rendering, "But the
earth *had become* a ruin and a desolation", is a rendering which does
more justice to the original and deserves more serious consideration
as an alternative than it has been customary to afford it in recent
years.

It is, after all, quite conceivable that some catastrophe *did* occur
prior to the appearance of Man for which we do not yet have the kind
of geological evidence we would like. Only twenty years ago uniform -
itarianism reigned supreme - but recently the Theory of Continental
Drift has shaken this long established doctrine to its foundations.

There could be other surprises yet in store for us. For myself, in
the meantime, the most important thing of all is to know as precisely
a sit can be known, exactly what the Word of God really says.... even
if for the time being it does conflict with current geological theory.
All we can hope to do is to contribute light; to minds of greater
precision who may thus be enabled to hit upon the exact truth.

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